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# **Internet and Social Media in Malaysia: Development, Challenges and Potentials**

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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## **Abstract**

The penetration of the Internet and social media has helped Malaysia abreast with the other developed countries. Nonetheless, being a multicultural country, Malaysia has to ensure her multiracial population lives in harmony and peace. This happens with the integrated help of media control and regulations exercise in Malaysia: the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Film Censorship Act, Broadcasting Act, Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA), and media ownership control. Many researches have been conducted pertaining to the Internet and social media that have been published locally in line with the development of the Internet and social media in Malaysia. Similarly, new media is also subjected to being controlled through methods such as controlling the Internet, blocking and filtering, and content removal. The chapter also looks into the impact of the Internet and social media on civil society, thus creating a momentum to promote toward giving suggestions for future research involving not only theories but also models using more sophisticated analyses. More research can be done and the future of research is bright. Other areas that can be looked at are the impacts of the Internet and social media on the young populace of the nation.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, media control, media ownership, politics, social media

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## **1. Introduction**

With a population of more than 25 million and a land area of approximately 330,000 km, Malaysia is considered to be one of the new industrialized countries [1]. Situated in southeast Asia, Malaysia is divided into east and west. Kuala Lumpur, the country's capital, is situated on the west, better known as peninsular Malaysia; the two states in east Malaysia—Sabah and Sarawak—form the Borneo Island. Malaysia is best known for its multiracial composition

which includes the majority Malays and other Bumiputera groups (67%), followed by the Chinese (26.0%) and Indian (7%) ethnic groups. With many races co-existing, Malaysia has myriad cultures, religions, and languages. Although it is considered a Muslim country with Islam being the official religion, many other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism are practiced in Malaysia. The National Language Act (1967) sanctioned Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) as the country's official language and stipulated that all formal events should be conducted in Malay. English is also widely used, as are other ethnic languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Tamil, and other native tongues.

### **1.1. The Malaysian media**

Malaysia has a history of media control. Through media laws and concentrated media ownership, the Malaysian Government oversees all the information circulating in the mass media. Media laws such as the Printing Press Act (1984) and Broadcasting Act (1987) limit political discussions in that news or stories deemed derogatory or overly critical of the government cannot be published. Freedom of speech and expression are also limited by laws that stipulate what can and cannot be discussed in public. Sedition and defamation laws restrict freedom of speech and protect political figures from being scrutinized; and laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA) enable the authorities to detain without trial anyone accused of disrupting the country's harmony. Thus, the media in Malaysia offers limited space for citizens to engage in political discourse. While some forums for political discussions are available in the alternative media produced by opposition parties or non-government organizations, they are often hampered by media laws [2].

Opposition and dissenting voices do not have access to the mainstream media. These conditions have served the government well in terms of securing support from the people. Due to the lack of open access to the mainstream media, the opposition parties in Malaysia have resorted to creating their own alternative media. Malaysia's alternative media includes "politically contentious" [3, 2] professional online newspapers, non-governmental organization (NGO) websites, and journalistic blogs. The primary objective of these alternative forms of communication is to challenge "the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through the mainstream media" (p. 3) [2]. Thus, the alternative media in Malaysia mostly adopts political, oppositional, and radical inclinations. The alternative media often finds it difficult to survive due to the lack of finances and barriers of license renewals. The late 1990s saw the advent of new digital technologies. By this time, the alternative media had expanded and incorporated the Internet and digital media, such as compact discs and video discs. Although government control of oppositional media remains tight, the Internet provides a new medium for political activists to convey their message without the need to worry excessively about regulations. This relative freedom exists from 1997 when Malaysia signed the Bill of Guarantee. The bill was an agreement designed to reassure international investors that Malaysia would not impose any censorship on the Internet [4].

### **1.2. Malaysians online**

As at the end of 2012, almost 19 million Malaysians were online. This accounted for 66% of the Malaysian population [5]. For most part, the Malaysian Government has been very serious

in its attempt to make Malaysia a regional and global player in information technology (IT). Since the Internet was introduced to the Malaysian public in 1995, many strategic steps have been taken to accelerate its penetration. Public schools have been equipped with computer labs, tax exemptions have been given for the purchases of laptops and Internet connections, and a multimedia university was built to create Internet-savvy graduates [6]. Public and private institutions have been expected to incorporate IT technologies in their operations. The government launched its own IT policy whereby all government offices must be online and paper-less by 2015. In 2010, the government launched My e-Government (myEG), a one-stop portal for Malaysians to deal with any kind of government-related services such as the payment of taxes and general summons. The introduction of broadband in 2007 further sealed the Internet as an important component of Malaysian life. Better and faster Internet access has facilitated the boom in e-commerce and online businesses. It has also allowed Malaysians to extract more from the Internet, especially in the form of faster streaming of media content. Hence, Malaysians have become more reliant on the Internet for everyday activities such as the daily news, paying bills, or simply catching up with family and friends. On top of that, more and more Malaysians are sharing pieces, if not most, of their lives online. The availability of individual media and social networking sites allows Malaysians to not only extract information or conduct transactions but also to create and contribute ideas, information, and life stories. To date, 70% of online users in Malaysia have a Facebook account. In fact, Malaysia has the fifth-most Facebook users in Asia.

## 2. Background of the Malaysian media

In 1978, Lent used the term “guided media” to describe the Malaysian press system wherein the leaders of the country “admonish mass media, especially broadcasting, to be uncritical of government policies” (p. 72) [7]. The rationale was that Malaysia, “being a newly emerging nation, needs time to get on its feet. The mass media, therefore, should provide this by not touching on sensitive issues, by stressing positive and ignoring negative societal characteristics” (p. 72) [7]. Almost 40 years later, Lent’s [7] description is still relevant. Because of this close relationship between the state and the media, international media watchers have often been critical of the state of freedom of the Malaysian media and have been skeptical of the justifications provided by the state. Indeed, according to Lim [8] (p. 88), immediately following Article 10 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees the right to free speech, is a set of qualifiers that give the parliament the power to impose “such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of the Federation or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality”. In imposing such restrictions in the interest of security, public order, and even the contested concept of morality, the parliament “may pass laws prohibiting the questioning of any stipulated matter, right, status, position, privilege, sovereignty or prerogative”. The Malaysian Government’s official control over the media has always been tight. In the name of political stability, economic development, and social harmony, the Malaysian Government is very strict in its control of press freedom. The mainstream press depicts the government leaders as having a naturalized affinity with the general populace in terms of socioeconomic aspirations and goals. This public declaration of the Barisan Nasional (BN) Government’s economic successes is elaborated by

the media's calculated tightening and to some extent, closure of access for the other contesting political parties [9]. The opposition parties' stance on some issues and their policies on economic, political, and cultural matters are hardly heard by the electorate. The coverage of the opposition parties by the mainstream media has often resulted in the former being depicted in a negative light [10].

## 2.1. Media control and regulations in Malaysia

Through media laws and concentrated media ownership, the Malaysian Government oversees all the information circulating in the mass media. Media laws such as the Printing Press Act (1984) and Broadcasting Act (1987) limit political discussions in that news or stories deemed derogatory or overly critical of the government cannot be published. Freedom of speech and expression are also limited by laws that stipulate what can and cannot be discussed in public. Sedition and defamation laws restrict freedom of speech and protect political figures from being scrutinized, and laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA) enable the authorities to detain without trial anyone accused of disrupting the country's harmony. The University and College Act (AUKU) prohibit students from being involved in any form of political activity. More specifically, there are four media laws that are detrimental to the freedom of speech and press. The laws are Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Film Censorship Act, Broadcasting Act, and, Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA).

### 2.1.1. *The Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984)*

The PPPA is the law that controls the Malaysian print media. Established in 1984, it imposes printing license and publishing permits that can only be approved by the Home Affairs Minister [11]. Under this law, a potential publisher needs a publishing license from the ministry before starting a newspaper or magazine. The publisher must apply for a new license every year. This creates a climate of self-censorship among Malaysian editors and journalists, especially those publishers who have much to lose considering the high production cost of traditional print media [10]. The PPPA also controls foreign publication available in the country. Foreign publications are required to pay a large deposit that can be forfeited if the publishers are found to be prejudiced to the national interest [11].

The government has often threatened to terminate or not renew the license of some critical newspapers from the opposition parties, such as *Harakah* owned by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), *Suara* owned by the Peoples Party, and *The Rocket* owned by the Democratic Action Party (DAP) [12]. The wider effects of the PPPA on freedom of expression and press, the media, and the development of civil society in Malaysia have been far reaching. As an outcome of the *Reformasi* Movement in the early 2000s, the BN government did not renew the permits of magazines, including *Detik*, *Tamadun*, *Wasilah*, and a newspaper, *Eksklusif*, for criticizing the government over the citizen's and political rights. For example, *Harakah*, a newspaper published by the opposition party PAS, was forced to reduce its circulation from twice a week to twice a month and was allowed to be sold only to party members, not the public [9].



### 2.1.2. *Film Censorship Act (2002)*

In Malaysia, film censorship is controlled by the Film Censorship Board under the prerogative of the Home Ministry. In 2002, the Film Censorship Act was revised to state that all films screened in Malaysian cinemas must first be certified by the Film Censorship Board. The Board imposed a rating system on all TV programs and films aired in Malaysia. The system categorized films and TV programs based on different types of audiences. The first category “U” is for general viewing which meant that films in this category can be watched by audiences of all ages and can be screened at any time. The second category is the “PG13” films that require parental guidance for audiences under 13 and can only be screened from 6.00 to 10.00 pm on weekdays and from 6.00 to 12.00 pm on weekends. The third category “18” includes films that can be watched by audiences who are aged 18 and above and can only be screened from 10.00 pm to 6.00 am daily [13].

According to Wan et al. [14], most films that are censored by the Film Censorship Board dealt with three sensitive issues which are religious, cultural, and moral values. Basri and Alauddin [15] added that political ideology also plays an important role in film censorship. Films that are deemed to depict Malaysia negatively are banned. Such films include the Ben Stiller-directed film “Zoolander” which depicted Malaysia as an impoverished and underdeveloped country. In the past decade alone, almost 100 films have been banned from Malaysian cinemas, and these included local and imported films [13]. Most recently, on July 2013, two Malaysian bloggers, Alvin Tan and Vivian Lee, were charged for producing and sharing pornographic photographs in their blog. On October 2012, Tan and Lee shared photographs of them having sex in their blog—<http://alviviswingers.tumblr.com/>. They also uploaded their sex video on YouTube. They were charged under Section 5(1) of the Film Censorship Act 2002 that states that no person shall have or cause himself to have in his possession, custody, control or ownership; or circulate, exhibit, distribute, display, manufacture, produce, sell or hire any film or film-publicity material which is obscene or is otherwise against public decency. Tan and Lee face a fine between 10,000 and 50,000 RM, or a maximum 5-years’ jail, or both, upon conviction.

### 2.1.3. *Broadcasting Act (1984)*

The Broadcasting Act was enacted in response to the privatization of the broadcasting media initiated by the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. When Malaysia's first private TV channel, TV3, was introduced, the Broadcasting Act was seen as the government's legal medium to control the emerging private broadcasting channels. The Act allows the Information Ministry to control and monitor all radio and television channels and to suspend or cancel the permit of any private company that broadcasts information which contradicts government policies or the state-sponsored Asian values (see Section 2.3.2) [16]. Hence, even with the introduction of private channels and satellite TV technology, political contestations cannot appear on any Malaysian television. The initial two TV channels, RTM1 and RTM2, are state-sponsored channels and are under the direct prerogative of the Information Minister, thereby posing no threat to the state [9].

The Broadcasting Act was controversial because it did not specify the parameters in which the Act operates. This gives the information minister free control over undefined aspects of local broadcasting. One of the most criticized aspects of the Minister's use of the Act is the implementation of censorship. In 1995, the then Information Minister, Mohamed Rahmat, initiated a strict censorship campaign against what he termed as the media's excessive portrayal of Western images and counter-culture values. He imposed censorship conditions that have been considered as unreasonable and lacking credibility. Among the conditions were the strict requirements for male TV entertainers to have short hair and female newscasters to not show their neck [17]. With the advent of the Internet and new media, the Broadcasting Act was no longer able to cover the scope of the expanding broadcast and Internet media. For example, the Broadcasting Act did not have provisions that could ascribe conditions for the licensing of Internet and satellite broadcasters. As such, the Act was repealed in 1998 and replaced by the Communication and Multimedia Act (Lee, 2002) [18].

#### *2.1.4. Communication and Multimedia Act (1998)*

The CMA replaced the Broadcasting Act to allow the government to regulate all manners of broadcasting including the Internet. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is entrusted with the role of promoting and regulating the communications and multimedia industry and to enforce the communications and multimedia laws in Malaysia. Hence, it has the power to approve, amend, or revoke broadcasting and other licenses (Lee, 2002). The MCMC is also given the task to implement and promote the government's national policy objectives for the communications and multimedia sector. The CMA has some enlightened provisions which protect freedom of expression online, such as Section 3(3) which states "Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet". However, the MCMC, under the control of the Minister of Energy, Water, and Communication (EWC), has enormous discretionary power to take certain actions against media users [19].

One example was the MCMC blocking the MalaysiaToday.net website in August 2008 because of commentaries that the MCMC alleged were "insensitive, bordering on incitement". The EWC Minister claimed the action was well within his jurisdiction and cited Section 263 of the Act which permits certain actions for the "protection of the public revenue and preservation of national security". The block was lifted the next day after a public uproar and criticisms by some United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) leaders who saw the block as negative publicity for the government, which had just sustained a massive loss in the 2008 election.

## **2.2. Media ownership**

Restrictions on media freedom in Malaysia are not only confined to the direct legal control imposed through the many laws and regulations but also through an indirect control mechanism in the form of ownership. This is especially true when much of the mainstream media in the country is owned directly or indirectly by entities linked to the ruling political party. Most notably is Media Prima's monopoly over the mass media. Media Prima is the largest media conglomerate in the country. It is a publicly traded company listed on the Main Board of the Malaysia Stock Exchange. Media Prima controls 43% of the New Straits Times Press

(NSTP) Group. NSTP is Malaysia's oldest and largest publisher. Its three main newspapers, *New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian*, and *Harian Metro*, have a combined circulation exceeding a million copies per day. Media Prima also controls the private television broadcast sector in the country. It owns and operates four out of six of the free-to-air television channels, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, and TV9. The other two, RTM1 and RTM2, are directly run by the Ministry of Information [16]. According to Lim [8], Media Prima commanded 50% of TV viewership in the country as of March 2008. Moreover, Sani [9] explains that anti-monopoly laws against concentration of media ownership do not exist in Malaysia, and this has allowed Media Prima to steadily acquire controlling stakes in most media outlets in the country.

The conglomerate also owns four radio stations, Fly FM, Radio Wanita (Women's radio), Hot FM, and One FM. In addition, it owns a motion picture company (Grand Brilliance), a recording studio (Ambang Klasik), and several advertising companies (Gotcha, Uniteers, Right Channel, UPD, and Big Tree Outdoor). The dominance of Media Prima becomes more problematic because it is a subsidiary of Malaysia Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB), a government-backed corporation. Major shareholders of both Media Prima and MRCB are known to be supporters of the government, with many of them holding posts within UMNO. This means that through its link with the media conglomerate, the UMNO has a disproportionate amount of influence on the major television, newspaper, radio, and advertising agencies in the country [9].

The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the second and the third largest parties in the BN coalition, are also major stakeholders in the media industry. Lim [8] indicated that the MCA, through its investment arm, Huaren Holdings, owns over 40% of shares in The Star which is the most profitable newspaper in the country. The MCA investment arm also controls over 20% of the Nanyang Press Group which controls local Chinese newspapers, the China Press and the Nanyang Siang Pau, one of the most established Chinese-language newspapers in the country. Lim [8] also highlighted that in 2007, the Malaysian-based Sinchew Media Corporation, also a company closely linked to the MCA, announced its intention to merge with the Hong Kong-based Ming Pao Group and invited Nanyang Press Holdings to form a tri-partite venture. The Sinchew Group owns the lucrative Chinese language daily, Sinchew Jit Poh, the highest circulating Chinese language newspaper in the country. The merger, realized in 2008, resulted in the creation of Media Chinese International Limited, the largest Chinese language publication group outside of China and Taiwan. The Indian-based party, the MIC, conducts its dealings with the mass media through its investment arm, Maika Holdings Berhad. It was founded by the MIC President, M. Samy Vellu, who also serves as its chairman. It currently owns the Tamil language newspaper, Tamil Nesan (Tamil News), one of three Tamil language newspapers still in publication in the country [16].

### 3. Theories and researches on Internet and social media in Malaysia

Much research has been done by prolific researchers throughout Malaysia, especially by university academicians from 20 public universities, private universities, and colleges besides other research institutions of the nation. The researches were carried out empirically either



through the use of quantitative research design (survey and experimental methods) or the qualitative research design (in-depth interview, focus group discussion, case study, field observation, and document analysis). In most cases, the quantitative researches are widely reported compared to the qualitative researches in Malaysia. Quantitative research mainly applies theories related to the issues under study. Therefore, this chapter focuses on only the quantitative research and design researches that are mainly published in the three established journals on communication in Malaysia: *Jurnal Komunikasi* (Malaysia Journal of Communication), *Jurnal Pengajian Media Malaysia* (Malaysian Journal of Media Studies), and *Global Media Journal—Malaysian Edition*, which are published by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia since 1985, University Malaya since 1998, and Universiti Putra Malaysia since 2011, respectively. Among the functional analysis theories, the two popular theories are the uses and gratification theory [20] and the agenda setting theory [21].

The uses and gratification theory is widely used in relation to the uses of the social media and the satisfaction attained from using them. When the research discusses issues on information sharing using the media (traditional media and social media), the chance is that they tend to incorporate both media concurrently. Rarely do they share information in isolation, by using a specific media. Some studies done pertaining to information sharing (mutual seeking and giving of information) using the traditional media and the contemporary media are conducted by Lim [22], Zain et al. [23], and Wok et al. [24]. With regard to information seeking, Yusuf [25] analyzes the political issues in Malaysia.

Researches have also been done on various target audiences such as youth [26, 27], employees in organizations [28], flood victims [29], Malaysian active users [30], and Malaysian university students on civic participation [31]. Researches that have been conducted pertaining to the uses and gratification theory might be related to other issues such as student involvement on campus activities [32] using multiple social media sites and searching for halal-related information [23].

Many studies have involved social media as sources of reference [32–34]. On the contrary, Shahnaz [35] focuses on just Facebook user profiles using the uses and gratification theory. This was at the initial stage of the social media, especially Facebook. Research on the different motives for using Facebook is conducted by Mahmud and Omar [36].

In addition to the uses and gratification theory, Lee et al. [37] use the diffusion of innovation theory [38] to test buying through advertisements on Facebook. Research has been done on specific sites, for example, religious websites [39], too.

The agenda setting theory is another theory that is widely used. It was tested among Nigerian students in Malaysia pertaining to homeland online newspapers. It focuses on the perceptions and attitudes toward issues and candidates in the Nigerian Presidential Election in 2011 [40, 41]. A study on news media consumption and the agenda setting theory was also done on youth [24] for both the traditional and new media—the Internet.

The diffusion of innovation theory is one of the theories used in testing the Internet usage in Malaysia, specifically in Kota Bharu, Kelantan [42]. The usage can be sustained provided the

users gain benefits from it. In addition, the Internet is an excellent medium for interpersonal and social network and the sharing of information among users.

Not only are theories the ones that have been used by the researchers but models, too, have been tested. One such model used as the underlying basis for testing the hypotheses of the study is the technology acceptance model (TAM) by Davis Jr. [43]. Even though the study was done in the urban areas, the users of webcasting [44] were still low then but with a promising prospect. The underlying theory used is the reasoned action theory [45]. A model was developed as a guide to test the acceptance of e-services. So, Mahbob et al. [46] find that the use of e-government services is perceived as beneficial to users, easy to use, trustworthy, and self-efficient. Nonetheless, the use is still low. Using the TAM model, e-commerce usage is also studied among Internet users in Malaysia [47].

Most research in Malaysia is done not to test a specific theory but it is merely to describe the current situation. A research is done on Internet usage in Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM), an Islamic radio station [48]. Basri et al. [49] caution the practitioners in the broadcast media and filming on development of digital growth. There is no theory involved, just an analytical perspective of the researchers themselves. In addition, Khan and Khan [50] caution the possibility of the digital divide among the developed and developing countries and among the haves and have-not populace of various countries due to the price encountered.

With the implementation of government initiatives to narrow the gap between the rural and the urban populace of Malaysia, Osman [51] calls for a concerted effort by the government and implementation bodies so that the gaps will not grow wider. Such noble effort by the government is an asset to the nation and the populace at large, regardless of the locality.

The Internet per se has been a pervasive and contemporary medium for attracting customers so much so that it is used for the marketing of products and services [22]. The Government of Malaysia has taken the initiative to promote its services to the public. Hence, a number of studies have been conducted to tap into the use of the e-government. As such, studies include Mahbob et al. [46] who find that the use of e-government is still low.

Much research discusses the development of new media on certain aspects and contexts, such as public relations [52], use of online newspapers in Malaysia [53] whereby the online newspaper complements the actual newspaper per se, online interpersonal relationships among adolescents in Malaysia [54], comparisons between the new policy between Malaysia and Korea [55], usage of websites for publications marketing (Mustafa and Adnan, 2012) [56], blog sites as a platform for voicing opinions toward the government [57], an analysis of the usage of e-books [58], digitalizing classroom instructions in Malaysia [59], the usage of social media in interpersonal relationships between people in Malaysia and Indonesia [60], and civic participation among Malaysian university students [31].

Bolong and Waheed [61], who test the uncertainty reduction theory and the social penetration theory for the interpersonal relationships among same gender, find that it is applicable for face-to-face communication using the computer-mediated communication (CMC) for all age groups.

## 4. The development of Internet and social media in Malaysia

Internet penetration in Malaysia is still very much an urban experience. Government statistics compiled by Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (2014) indicated that the highest internet penetration was in the Klang Valley area, which places the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, at 71%. This is followed by the most developed state in Malaysia, that is, Selangor (71%), and at the administrative capital, Putrajaya (89%). Internet penetration is still relatively low in other less populated states such as Sabah (43%) and Sarawak (41%), situated in east Malaysia where most residents belong to indigenous groups.

According to Kemp [62], almost 90% of Malaysian Internet users have registered social media accounts. Malaysians are considered as sociable online as they have among the highest average number of friends on social networks in the world. For instance, Facebook users in Malaysia have, on average, 233 friends which is about 80% higher than the global average. It was also found that Malaysians prefer to spend more time online rather than watching television or listening to the radio. Video streaming is one the favorite online activities with 51% of online users having an active YouTube account while 80% of Internet users stream online video content each month. Due to the increased popularity of social media in Malaysia, it is identified that one-third of the country's Internet traffic will be access to social sites. According to Muniandy and Muniandy [63] citing Burson-Marsteller [64], Malaysian netizens view social network sites 14 billion times every month. Factbrowser, citing comScore (2011), stated YouTube accounted for 67% of all online videos viewed in Malaysia [63].

### 4.1. Controlling the Internet

Although the government has initially claimed to not censor the internet, it has openly and blatantly controlled the Internet content when it comes to protecting their image. Any forms of content that are derogatory to the government are always curbed through indirect laws such as the Official Secrets Act and the Sedition Act. Punishments can include fines and several years in prison. In 2013, Prime Minister, Najib Razak, announced that the government would abolish the Sedition Act. However, by November 2014, the government had actually strengthened the law claiming it was necessary to maintain national harmony. Further amendments were made in 2015, enabling the authorities to block and reprimand online contents that are considered seditious while increasing the penalty from 3 to 7 years in prison.

Defamation Act 1957 is another law that can be used against online users. Libel and slander are two categories that fall under the Act. The mass media are somewhat protected from the Act because under Section 12(1), a media report is privileged if it is found that it is generally fair, accurate, and is without bad intentions. Online media such as blogs, however, are not protected by Section 12(1) of the Act because it is considered to be a personal opinion that may be libelous [65].

The Evidence Act 1950 was amended in 2012 that holds online users responsible for seditious content that is posted on their platforms. This means that hosts of websites, online forums, news outlets, blogs, and even internet service providers (ISPs) can be held responsible for contents that come from their platform or network whether or not they are the author.

As mentioned previously, legal control over the Internet falls under the purview of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) which is overseen by the Minister of Information, Communications, and Culture. The 1998 Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) gives the information minister certain authorities that include imposing license to operators of network and online services. Currently, MCMC actively monitors online speech, including scrutinizing online portals, social media, vloggers, and bloggers. Two main methods that have been used by the MCMC are blocking and filtering and content removal [66].

#### *4.1.1. Blocking and filtering*

According to MCMC [72] (2014), there are still no government interventions on websites except for sites that are considered pornographic. While there have been threats against contentious political sites, the government has not systematically targeted them [66]. There was an attempt in 2009 when the then Minister of Information, Communications, and Culture, Dr. Rais Yatim, proposed to evaluate the significance of having Internet filters and gatekeepers but he later backtracked following intense opposition by the public. By October 2014, the government said the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) had shut down or blocked more than 6000 websites that were considered unsuitable.

Because of the strict surveillance on online content, many government-linked companies and public universities practice self-censorship by restricting access to contentious online sites and blogs.

#### *4.1.2. Content removal*

According to Ahmad [52], while no public instructions have been made, MCMC has been known to remove content, especially those deemed critical to the government. Actions have been taken in a non-transparent manner that lacks legal and judicial formalities. Several blog owners and social media users have been ordered to remove their content by the MCMC. The contents mostly revolve around the three most sensitive issues in Malaysia that include race, religion, and royalty. The issue of religion is particularly most sensitive. In 2015, MCMC requested Facebook and YouTube to remove controversial Malaysian blogger Alvin Tan's video that showed him insulting the *adhan* or the Islamic call of prayer. To date, Alvin Tan is still on trial for several other cases in which he had insulted Islam and the Malaysian political leaders. However, the cases are still pending and Alvin has fled to the United States of America to avoid trial in Malaysia.

## **5. The impact on Internet and social media on civil society**

Opposition and dissenting voices do not have access to mainstream media. These conditions have served the government well in terms of securing support from the people. Due to the lack of open access to the mainstream media, the opposition parties in Malaysia have resorted to creating their own alternative media. Malaysia's alternative media includes "politically



contentious" [3, 2], professional online newspapers, NGO websites, and journalistic blogs. The main goal of these alternative media platforms is to contest "the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through the mainstream media" (p. 3) [2]. Thus, the alternative media in Malaysia mostly adopts political, oppositional, and radical inclinations. The alternative media often finds it difficult to survive due to the lack of finances and barriers to license renewals. The late 1990s saw the advent of new digital technologies. By this time, the alternative media had expanded and incorporated the Internet and digital media, such as compact discs and video discs.

According to Anuar [16] and Brown [12], the seeds for using the Internet as an alternative platform to the mainstream media were first sown during the Reformasi because at that time, the alternative media had expanded and had included the Internet and digital forums. Although government control over oppositional media was tight, the Internet provided a new medium for political activists to get their message across without the need to consider 57 government regulations. During the peak of the *Reformasi* movement in 1998–1999, numerous anti-government websites emerged, providing news and stories that were not available in the mainstream media [12]. Electronic bulletin boards gave the public a chance to discuss and discover other people's opinions. Although Anwar Ibrahim was not the first political figure to be unfairly detained and punished by the government, his story was the first to be openly discussed on the Internet, allowing Malaysians, for the first time, to personally access uncensored political information. Malaysians, who before the Reformasi had little exposure to information other than that coming from the government-controlled media, were suddenly awakened by the volume of political information coming from both the government media and the Internet. The use of the Internet was complemented by the use of faxes and copiers that further increased the reach of the news to the wider public [4]. During this time, new political and anti-government websites mushroomed. George [4] claimed that at one point there were no less than 40 anti-government websites, including *agendadaily*, *reformasi* online, *laman reformasi*, *reformasi.com*, *freeanwar.com*, *mahazalim*, *Freemalaysia*, *saksi*, and many others. Electronic forums and bulletin boards provided a fertile ground for the public to exchange opinions. While existing alternative presses were hampered by licensing and circulation constraints, the same constraints could not be applied on the Internet.

This relative freedom became more evident during the 2008 election when opposition groups were finally able to go against the restrictive campaign rules and dodge the virtual blackout by the mainstream media by going online and turning to blogs, news portals, and YouTube. By December 2006, majority of Malaysia's 10.3 million registered voters were between 21 and 35 years of age. This data, compiled by the Election Commission and published in *The Sun* in 2008, indicates that these voters would determine the results of general elections and that political parties must target this group to win. It is clear that in the 2008 election, the opposition parties targeted and won the hearts and minds of youth voters [67]. Compared with the opposition's constantly updated blogs and social media, the BN component parties were relatively very quiet online. According to Sani [67], Google searches on the DAP, Pakatan Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and PAS were so much higher compared to searches on UMNO and other BN component parties. In addition, Google searches on PAS and PKR in Malay by far were found to be the highest in small cities and towns, for instance, in Kuantan in Pahang and in Kajang



in Selangor [67]. According to Lim [8], opposition candidates also used the Internet to solicit funds for their election campaigns. In Lim's interview with blogger-politician Tony Pua, they discussed Pua's campaign for the Petaling Jaya Utara parliamentary seat, and Pua explained how he used e-donations as a way to raise funds for his candidacy. By asking for donations via his personal blog, Pua successfully collected more than 30,000 RM via credit card and online transfers. He needed to raise 50% of the amount that election candidates are legally allowed to use for campaign. Pua managed to collect some 45,000 RM over five nights from his nightly online political campaigns. Lim [8] explained that during the 2008 election day, Malaysia Today (<http://www.malaysia-today.net>), a popular political site, had around 15 million hits—a three-time hit increase of what they usually get. The number could be averaged out to about 625,000 visitors an hour.

The pioneer online newspaper, *Malaysiakini*, was so overwhelmed by visitors on polling day that the site broke down. At its peak, the site had around 500,000 visitors an hour, a sharp jump from the 100,000 to 200,000 hits it customarily had per day. In comparison, the website of the mainstream newspaper, New Straits Times, received only 970,000 visits for 1 day, from midnight on election day to midnight the following day. This further signified that the Internet-based media had broken the government's strict control over media and political deliberation. The government could no longer disregard the views expressed by the bloggers because they had claimed identifiable political power [68]. These contemporary political and media developments indicate that the Internet via the social media specifically have now allowed Malaysians to engage in civil political discourse.

## 6. Conclusions and suggestions

On May 5, 2013, Malaysians went to the polls again. There was much hype and anticipation about this election as many are anxious to know whether the coalition of opposition parties, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR), would be able to form a new government in Malaysia and replace the Barisan Nasional (BN), which has been in power since 1955. The voter turnout was remarkable. Approximately, 85% of registered voters or 11,257,147 Malaysians exercised their basic rights to vote, making it the highest voter turnout in Malaysian history.

In the midst of the election frenzy, three bloggers had been detained under the Sedition Act. Blogger "Milosuam" was arrested on May 2, 2013 under the Official Secrets Act on the basis that he had posted classified documents on his blog. "Milosuam" had also blogged that the Malaysian police had conducted early voting, a claim denied by police officials. Two other bloggers were also arrested. "King Jason" was arrested on May 6, 2013 over his allegations that the election was fraudulent and "Papagomo", an UMNO blogger, was arrested for racial remarks against the Chinese electorate who he claims were ungrateful and caused BN to suffer in the election. Both bloggers were detained under the Communications and Multimedia Act. Even with the repeal of the ISA and the Sedition Act, freedom of speech is still very much constrained in Malaysia.

On the Internet especially, everyday Malaysians, who are against such politics, are making their voices heard. In blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and many other online user platforms, calls

for unity and anti-racism are evident. While they are also those who support the racial stance, many are against it and this even includes supporters of BN. More interestingly, everyday citizens are sharing their memories, stories, and experiences of being part of a harmonious multiracial society and are proposing that these experiences should be considered as evidence that Malaysians are not racists. The Malays are calling on their Chinese friends specially to clarify that they are not what the mainstream media makes them out to be. The Chinese are expressing themselves by showing that they are not affected by the racist political propaganda and are in solidarity with their fellow Malaysians. While these reflections and analysis are based on limited observation, it indicates that new media are allowing everyday Malaysians to understand and participate in civil society. Expressing and sharing personal experiences and calling for unity and solidarity are powerful citizen actions.

What is clear from this analysis is that with the rise of Internet and social media, the availability of democratic media practices have changed the Malaysian media landscape and its corresponding effects on the experiences of being Malaysians. Therefore, more extensive and in-depth research that addresses the impact of these new media experiences can provide an encompassing understanding of how overlapping and complex new media experiences penetrate and evolve society and the experience of citizenship over time.

Not to forget that more research needs to be conducted in Malaysia using other theories such as the cultivation theory [69], resource dependency theory [70], and dependency theory [71].

It should be interesting to apply the use of models for social media activities in relation to any type of participant behavior. Many activities can be studied using a single media or integrated social media. The model can be developed based on the variables selected for mainly mediating variables. For example, the outcome of the social media use is in terms of participation. There are many types of participation that can be studied. In terms of participation, it can be classified in terms of political participation, community participation, social participation, citizen participation, citizen communication, and citizen journalism, civic engagement, and socialization of youth. Since social media involves information-sharing process, many communication processes can be tapped. Such sharing activities can involve information-sharing process involving social support groups during a natural disaster, sharing of health information, and employment information. In terms of non-formal organizations involving linkages formation, social media is beneficial for leadership development. Leadership formation through popularity exhibited by the number of followers can result in popular leadership formation, decision-making process, overload, and underload of information.

With the application of structural equation model (SEM) using the analysis of a moment structure (AMOS) program and smart partial least square (PLS) method, many models can be developed. It is up to the researchers to explore the variables considered in the model. Therefore, it is up to the creativity of the individual research to develop and confirm their model(s). This is where any new model developed can extend and integrate theories in line with contemporary contextual situations.

The issue of leadership is very important. Therefore, models can be developed based on the networking entity of social media capabilities. It depends on the creativity of the researchers

concerned to tap the possibility of media as the mediating variable, especially for the public administration system, civic engagement, and citizen communication. Some of the models developed elsewhere in the world can also be retested in Malaysia. More is expected from the researchers to be creative enough. Participative management can also be explored with the emergent leadership based on popularity of the individual concerned based on his or her special and unique characteristics especially socialization, involving different levels of individual status.

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